

Notes on my poems “Insadong-Gil” and “Skyline Divide”

Insadong-Gil is the main street in a neighborhood of Seoul, where my teenaged son and I were sitting in front of a Buddhist temple together once. Somehow the chanting we’d been listening to in the temple had affected me and I started crying, at which moment, a monk slipped prayer beads on my wrist and on my son’s wrist and hurried away.

Skyline Divide is a popular trail that leads across a very high ridge in the Cascades Range of my home state, Washington. You hike up to it and then walk across this narrow ridge, with spectacular views down each side. I have to thank my friend Carol Guess for the quote that begins this poem--though very different, Carol and I shared pasts that diverged from our present lives as completely as those gulfs on either side of the Cascade ridge. Once, in a very intense cyber-conversation, we touched on the subject of the peculiar nostalgia we shared for a past life that had been, awful as it was many ways, writ so large.

The series of poems these two poems are a part of is deeply affected by travel—poems take place all over the world, several in airports—and by Korean poetics, particularly the metaphor-rich, emotional, musical form called the *sijo*. All of these qualities of *sijo* have been speaking to me, including the frequent turn or twist at the end, and while I make no claims to be writing *sijo*, the characteristics of *sijo* offered a welcome change from a contemporary poetic style that, in my own hands, had become too thinky, too coy, and too distant. I had thought I was done writing about my adolescence, when people who had committed some now-unthinkable-to-me crimes had been my entire world. But I realized that in many ways I had barely scratched the surface of that time, even in memoir, and certain things—those friends I had, the drugs, my institutionalization and treatment with electric shock-- kept bubbling up, demanding to be dealt with. Somehow the experience of travel, of what I could grasp of the *sijo*, combined to crack that world open again.

A link to a related poem in this series: <http://www.newrepublic.com/article/books-and-arts/magazine/108803/no-words-lecture-hall>

An interview: <http://americanliteraryreview.blogspot.com/2012/09/an-interview-with-suzanne-paola-susanne.html>

my website: www.suzannepaola.com